

Journalism changing lives: Polis in Kibera, Kenya

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The news industry might be in trouble in the West but today I found a place where journalism is growing and it is changing lives.

In Kenya the parliament has voted for a law which will restrict the freedom of the press. Indeed, they arrested a whole group of journalists at an Independence Day rally who were trying to cover protests against tax increases.

kibera-004.jpg

But in the giant Nairobi slum of Kibera I found a bunch of journalists who are making news relevant and popular with the people. Pamoja FM is a two year-old volunteer-run radio station that serves a community of more than a million. They get some NGO support but they can't afford Internet access and their 'production studio' has no furniture and no mics.

The BBC and US AID has donated some computers so at least the team no longer write their scripts with pen on paper. They have lap top editing software and a rather nifty mixing output desk. When I was there this was being fully exploited by two rapping reggae DJs.

kibera-001.jpg

Every day the volunteer news team led by Fatima Sanbur and Beryl Omunya produces three ten minute news bulletins at 7am, 1pm and 5pm. Recent research indicates they have a weekly reach of 500,000 people. The research also showed that people valued the news as well as the built programme features on topics like sexual health and personal finance. They value it because they simply can't get that news and information anywhere else.

The editorial team newsgather by touring around the local administration offices, youth groups, NGOs and so on. as well as ringing around on their mobiles. Just like proper local journalists used to do in the UK. They are all local people so they know where the stories and how to talk and listen to the residents. About 10% of their coverage (all in Swahili) is political and it can be critical even of the Prime Minister, who comes from Kibera.

But the real connection with their vast audience is through the ubiquitous mobile phone. Listeners SMS the team with announcements, information and with questions. "They ask too many questions" jokes chief reporter Fatima Sanbur.

"They send us a text with a message. It might be a request for information about where to get medicine. We answer the message and broadcast it. It is a kind of social work as well as news".

Pamoja FM's founder and general manager is Adam Hussein, a genial and wise retired journalist who used to work at the main Kenyan daily paper, The Nation.

He puts his pension into running Pamoja from the top floor of a small block of flats overlooking the teeming slums.

"When I was at The Nation we did not cover stories about Kibera. People could be murdered here and it was not a story. These people did not have any news for them. The commercial radio stations do not hire journalists. We are the only news they have"

Kibera did hit the world's media during the riots that followed last December's elections. Some of the worse inter-tribal violence happened in this very mixed community. During the conflict Pamoja deliberately suppressed some news of violence. Fatima Sanbur explained that if they had broadcast news of every incident as it happened then they would simply have provoked more panic and more reprisals. But they did become the trusted source for information on what was going on, not just for the people of Kibera, but also for other national and international news media organisations.

Now Fatima presents a weekly show dedicated to rebuilding community solidarity:

"We try to show that people are Kiberians first and from a tribe second. By talking about it we can help them see what damage the violence did to everyone's lives"

It is difficult to measure the impact of what Pamoja FM does. When I was there they were just wrapping up a story about a child who had gone missing. The parents had texted Pamoja who made an announcement and the kid was discovered and reunited with its family.

That is just one tiny example of the direct effect they have on people's lives. Now add up all their social awareness work and consider the voice they give to a dispossessed and impoverished community. That has got to be worth investing in. I find it remarkable that out of the millions that is poured into lavish aid schemes so little finds its way to media work like Pamoja. Perhaps more should be spent on microphones and journalism training as well as traditional aid. There are still other vast slums in Nairobi without any community radio service. The journalists I met at Pamoja FM were some of the brightest, most committed and street-savvy that I have seen in years. Give them the tools and their journalism will continue to inform and transform their listeners' lives.

If you want to get in touch with Pamoja FM to find out more about their work and to support their operation, please contact Adamhussein@gmail.com

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